

Warrior Care Month: Reintegration

*Soldier and Family Assistance Center
readies Soldiers for life after WTU*

By Melanie Casey
Editor

Their injuries are severe, sometimes life threatening, usually debilitating, often for life.

The more than 80 Soldiers in Fort Meade's Warrior Transition Unit suffer from an array of diagnoses including cancer, traumatic brain injury, orthopedic problems and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Their myriad medical concerns are handled by a triad of health care professionals consisting of a nurse case manager, primary care physician and squad leader. Together with the unit's social worker, the triad works as a team to ensure the Soldiers receive the most appropriate and effective medical care.

Whatever the cause, Soldiers can no longer successfully complete their military missions, so they move to a WTU during their healing process.

Some stay a few months; others, such as Master Sgt. Robert Braddock, who has been with the WTU since April, remain much longer. Some will heal enough to return to an active-duty status; others will continue on a Reserve status. The rest will separate from the military altogether — through retirement or medical disability — and re-enter civilian life.

But how do Soldiers reintegrate into a society where PT tests and M16s aren't the norm?

Along with the staff of the WTU, the Soldier and Family Assistance Center, which caters solely to Soldiers assigned to the Fort Meade WTU, offers a plethora of programs to prepare Soldiers — and their families — for life after life at the WTU.

Located at 830 Chisholm Ave. alongside Army Community Service, the center offers benefits counseling, personnel services, transition and employment readiness, parenting classes, financial readiness, stress management, substance abuse information and more. "We try to make it their home away from home," said R.C. Fisher, SFAC guidance counselor.

"The SFAC provides services which are tailored and responsive to the needs of warriors in transition and their family members," said Stacey Hale, SFAC director. "It provides a warm, relaxed environment where Soldiers and their families can gather to foster physical, spiritual and mental healing."

All WTU Soldiers visit the SFAC during inprocessing to learn about its services, said Michele Clark, SFAC human resources specialist. They return on a recurring basis to partici-

pate in special events and activities or to receive tailored personnel services, she added.

Clark helps Soldiers return to duty when they are ready to leave the WTU. Among other things, she works with the Department of the Army to get a Soldier's new assignment, ensure records are current and update casualty documents.

The center has helped Sgt. 1st Class Michael Dunn, who was assigned to the WTU in July, with education information and resume building.

"The WTU and SFAC have been by my side since day one," said Dunn, who may be medically separated in February after 16 years of service. "They help you out as much as they can. ... As a result of their efforts, I'm prepared if I have to get out."

The SFAC staff is "fantastic," said Erica Ganger. Her husband, Spc. Anthony Ganger, has been at the WTU since February. "I don't know what we'd do without them."

The couple, parents to 1-year-old Anthony Jr., has attended workshops on parenting, marriage and resume building, among others. "It was rough at first," said Erica, who struggles with her own medical conditions, but "everything fell into place once we got here."

Ganger is being medically separated and will leave the WTU and military early next year. The family is planning to move to Florida, where he hopes to get a job with the government. As a result of Fisher's employment transition services, Ganger has participated in several local job fairs and is ready for whatever lies ahead, Hale said.

Research indicates that positive social support can enhance resilience to stress and decrease the functional consequences of trauma-induced disorders such as PTSD, Hale said. As a result, the SFAC sponsors frequent outings for WTU Soldiers and their families. "If I was in the outside world, I wouldn't get a chance to [go to these places]," Dunn said.

The SFAC is a one-stop shop where Soldiers and their families can receive information and assistance to get them through a difficult time, Hale said. SFAC Social Services Assistance Coordinator Chris Lewis works to help Soldiers acclimate to their assignment to the WTU and provides services while throughout their stay, Hale said. He provides stress management and life skills training and leads the Warrior and Family Support Group. "He is also the link to other community support agencies," she added.

"People really want to help you," Braddock said. "They're genuine."